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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an institutional research office's use of extensive senior survey data to examine indirectly the effectiveness of a career services early intervention program over a period of four years. The study compared responses on the senior survey by participants (N=200) in the sophomore career exploration seminar with responses of non-participants (N=4234). Analysis indicated that seminar participants were more likely than other students to be female, Asian, and liberal arts majors. All career service items listed on the senior questionnaire were utilized more heavily by the career seminar participants than by non-participants. This difference was most notable for participation in the individual career counseling services, walk-in hours, job search workshops, and use of internship listings. Additionally, seminar participants showed a higher level of satisfaction with these services than did the non-participant group. Participants were far more likely to give the services of the career center an "essential" rating compared to non-participants on an importance scale. Participants were more likely to have completed an internship than non-participants and also expressed higher ratings for their overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience. (DB)

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Does Early Intervention Make a Difference in Career Planning?

How an Institutional Research Office Provided Answers Without Implementing a New Survey

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held in Seattle, Washington, May 30-June 3, 1999.
This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of AIR Forum Papers.

Dolores Vura
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Abstract

Does Early Intervention Make a Difference in Career Planning? How an Institutional Research Office Provided Answers Without Implementing a New Survey

An abundance of research exists studying the process and effects of career choices for college students. Most focus on student experiences in the academic major and the relative impact on career decisions. Few research studies examine the effects of career advising and planning administered through a college career services center, and virtually no research examines the impact of early intervention by a career center on students' decision-making.

This paper will describe an institutional research office's use of extensive senior survey data to examine the effectiveness of a career services early intervention program over a period of four years.

Does Early Intervention Make a Difference in Career Planning?

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I Introduction: Career Choice and the College Experience

An abundance of research exists studying the process and effects of career choices for college students (Astin, 1977, Braxton & Brier,1989) Most of these studies, however, focus on student experiences in the academic major and the relative impact on career decisions. Few research studies examine the effects of career advising and planning administered through a college career services center, and virtually no research examines the impact of early intervention by a career center on students' decision-making.

In a related vein, studies of the undergraduate experience reveal that increased student involvement in college, both in academic and co-curricular areas, leads to greater satisfaction levels in college and greater success beyond college (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1981). Little research exists, however, linking student satisfaction to early involvement with specific programs, particularly those of an applied or non-academic nature.

This paper will describe an institutional research office's use of extensive senior survey data to examine indirectly the effectiveness of a career services early intervention program over a period of four years.

II. Sophomore Career Explorations Series

The Office of Career Services at a small research university established the Sophomore Career Explorations Series, which was designed as an proactive intervention program to reach out to students early in their tenure at college. Sophomore students were the target of the intervention because they are required to declare a major at the end of their sophomore year and also would have at least two years to explore all of the experiential opportunities available to them. In addition, a small but consistent body of evidence indicates that sophomores tend to exhibit significantly higher levels of mature thinking about or planning for a career than do freshmen. (Blann, 1985; Ware & Apprich, 1980)

The program, presented in a seminar format, was designed to enable students to make more effective use of career resources and to help them feel more prepared to make decisions regarding their post-graduate plans. The Office of Career Services ran a series of career planning workshops with limited enrollment for sophomores at intervals throughout the academic year. The only information about participants that was collected by Career Services was participant names.

Career Services developed a set of clearly articulated goals for the sophomore career explorations series. The primary objective of the workshop was to introduce students to the first two steps career planning process: self-assessment and career awareness/research. Additional objectives included providing information regarding the availability and access to career related resources and a brief introduction to job search procedures and resume writing.

III. Annual Senior Survey

Each year prior to commencement, an extensive survey of graduating seniors is conducted by the Office of Institutional Research. The response rate has consistently averaged 95% for the past ten years.[1] The survey items range from questions about a student's profile, such as gender, race and college major, to attitudinal items, such as levels of satisfaction with particular university services. Students are routinely queried about their satisfaction with career services and their level of participation in these services.

To examine the possible impact of the sophomore career explorations program, responses by the sophomore seminar participants to the senior survey were compared to non-participants completing the senior survey. The coordinator of the program maintained a list of participants' names, thus facilitating the our ability to track four cohorts of participants and their survey responses.

IV. Linking of variables/findings

Although each years' cohort of participants was small compared to the larger, non-participant population; the numbers were sufficient to examine significant differences between the two groups. The size of each cohort over the four years is presented in Table 1.

[1] The senior survey is linked to the distribution of marching order cards. Students are required to return a completed survey in order to obtain his/her marching order card which is absolutely essential to have in order to participate in commencement activities.

Table 1

Profile of Cohorts		
Cohort Year (Seniors)	Participants in Sophomore Explorations Series	Non-Participants
1995	54	1044
1996	63	1081
1997	35	1041
1998	48	1068
Total	**200**	**4234**

After linking the seminar participants' information to the senior survey databases, it became clear that the four cohorts were not representative of the general undergraduate population. More female students and more Asian students participated in the program than the overall population (Table 2), and a slightly higher proportion of seminar participants were liberal arts majors compared to those in the general population (93% vs. 85%). When analyses were conducted to look for influences of gender and race, however, these differences were not found to be significant compared to the differences uncovered in the responses of the two groups.

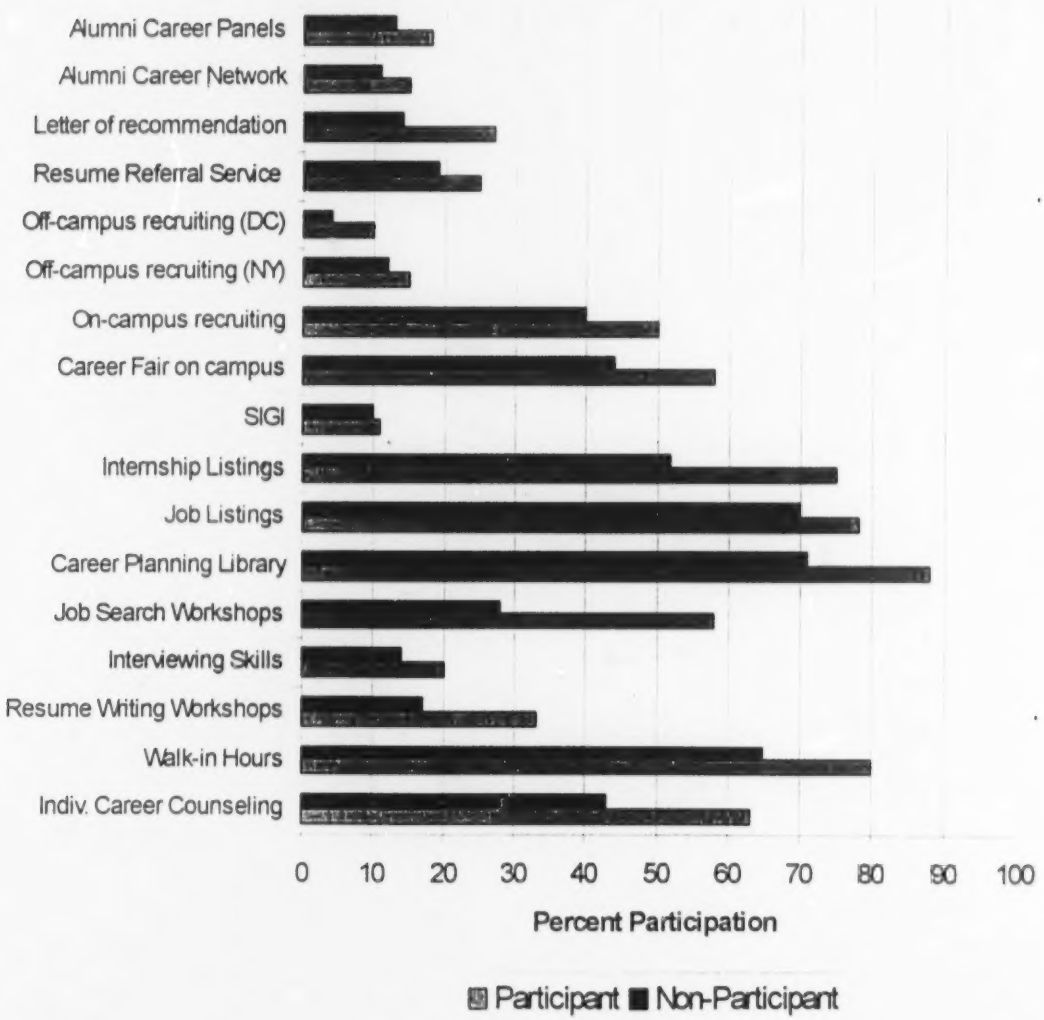
Table 2

Gender and Race Breakdowns of Participant and Non-Participant Groups (Total)							
	Male	Female	Black	Asian	Hisp.	White	Other
Participants	22%	78%	3%	21%	4%	66%	6%
Non-participants	48%	52%	4%	13%	3%	71%	9%

Significant differences were found between participant and non-participants' use of career services resources, as well as in their level of satisfaction with each of these services. All of the career service items listed on

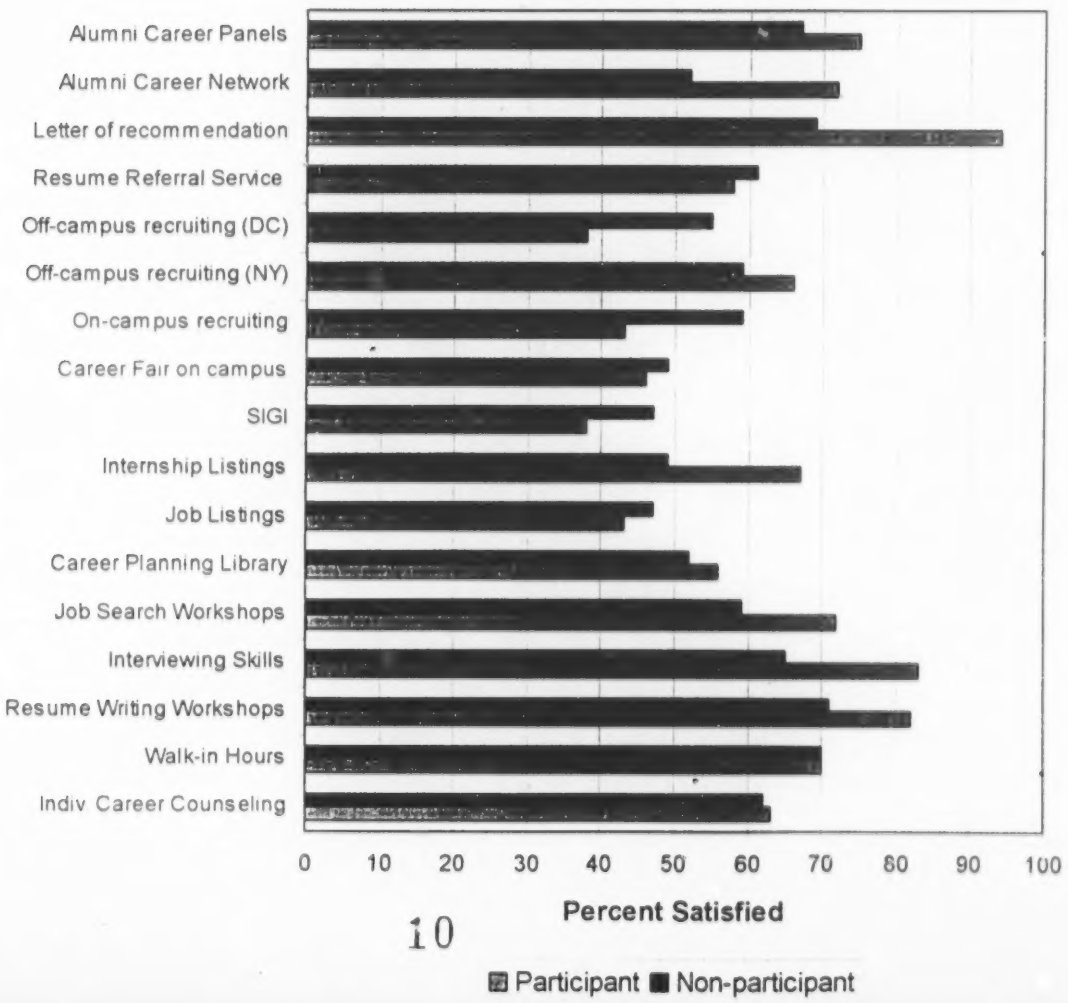
the senior survey were utilized more heavily by the sophomore career explorations group than the non-participant group. Most notably, participation in the individual career counseling services, walk-in hours, job search workshops and use of internships listings was much higher with the sophomore seminar group (Graph 1).

Graph 1: Participation in Career Service



Similarly, in almost all services, participants in the sophomore career explorations group showed a higher level of satisfaction with these services than the non-participant group. Sophomore participants were more satisfied with the resume writing and interview skills workshops, use of internship listings and the recommendation writing service (Graph 2). Participants were far more likely to give the overall services of the career center an "essential" rating compared to non-participants on an importance scale (75% vs. 58%). Non-participants were more satisfied with some of the recruiting services and job listings.

Graph 2: Satisfaction with Career Services



On the senior survey, students were asked to describe their plans for the following fall, as well as their job-finding experiences. Participants were far more likely to have completed an internship during their time as an undergraduate (75% participated in an internship versus 58% in the general population). Although participants were not more likely than non-participants to be employed in the fall, more students learned of their employment through internships if they participated in the sophomore seminar cohort.

Lastly, on overall satisfaction measures with their undergraduate experience, sophomore participants were more likely to give the institution high ratings, providing greater "very satisfied" ratings (41% vs. 38%) and more likely to indicate that they "definitely would" attend the institution again if given the opportunity (42% vs. 33%). Although linking these higher satisfaction ratings to participation in the sophomore career exploration series would be premature, one could argue that this fits well with Astin's theory of involvement, which states that the greater participation in campus life, the more satisfied students are with their experiences.

V. Implications of the Findings for the Career Center

It is always useful to solicit client feedback regarding an evaluation product. In this particular case, we contacted the former Director of the Office of Career Services who was instrumental in the creation of the program and the extended cohort analysis and the Office of Career Services staff member who is responsible for conducting the program.

Both felt that this particular cohort analysis was very useful. In addition to the workshop evaluations which are conducted immediately proceeding the session; this analysis has documented the value of the program. It has been utilized to demonstrate that several of the long-term goals of the program are in fact being achieved. Most notable is the fact that participants are more likely to utilize the resources of the career services center and to pursue internships.

The added benefit to conducting the evaluation in tandem with an on-going project is that the work required by the Career Services staff was minimal - providing only the names of students. The former director indicated that it was enormously helpful to have "someone else conduct the follow-up evaluation." He was concerned that given his time constraints and limited research expertise, that he would not be able to conduct a thorough non-biased evaluation and that he would be unable to easily locate participants. In addition, he did not have access to non-participant information and having data that contrasted participants and non-participants made a stronger case for additional support of the program.

The current program director indicated that Sophomore Career Exploration Series has become a staple in the office's programming, that there is solid support from the Dean of Sophomores, and the only question remains is how to expand the program so that more sophomores are able to participate.

VI. Summary and Broader Implications for Use of Cohorts with the Senior Survey

When the Office of Career Services approached the Office of Institutional Research several years ago to look for ways to evaluate the effectiveness of their

new sophomore intervention program, the institutional research office had in place years of data gathered from the senior survey about the overall effectiveness of their general services. With the new program, it was important to measure its effects in the context of broader services offered to all students, and the senior survey provided the logical vehicle. In fact, the current instrument is now being utilized for a variety of additional assessment type analyses, including advising programs and specific departmental activities.

Many of the academic and student services offered on college campuses could benefit from this comparative analysis if they are evaluated as part of a general outcomes instrument. Although some specific questions about the services cannot be answered using this method, a more general sense of the overall success of the programs may be obtained without the labor and expense of an additional survey instrument.[2] Advising programs and tutorial services are obvious choices as ongoing programs that would benefit from the feedback gathered from regularly administered surveys.

Many campuses now administer surveys for newly matriculated students, including accepted applicant surveys and the national CIRP instrument. Both of these surveys offer the possibility of tracking students' views as they enter an institution -- a tertiary "pre-test" of sorts. With unique student identifiers, the information on these surveys can be linked to other instruments, including the exiting senior survey.

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[2] The additional analyses associated with the evaluation of the Sophomore Careers Exploration Series required approximately two weeks of professional research staff time. An separate evaluation of the program would have required not only a greater allocation of research staff time; but also would have required additional expenditures of monies to complete the project..

For our institution, the collaboration with the Office of Career Services began as a way to provide data quickly and efficiently to a group already in progress. The implications for other campus groups and services, however, applying the same methodology, could be far-reaching. In an era of increasing demands on the limited resources of institutional research staffs, maximizing our databases as resources for multiple groups could be one way to manage the incoming data request traffic.

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